



January 12, 2021

Dear Benton and Franklin County School Administrators,

This updated Health District recommendation addresses considerations for conducting in-person learning in light of revised tools released by the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) in mid-December 2020. The guidance in this letter supersedes any conflicting recommendations conveyed in prior written or verbal communications from the Health District.

DOH's [Tools to Prepare for Provision of In-Person Learning among K-12 Students at Public and Private Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) endorsed the recommendations that Benton-Franklin Health District has offered since September, allowing schools to gradually phase in hybrid learning for young learners and for groups of students with the highest need for in-person learning. In the updated DOH guidance, thresholds for low, medium, and high transmission categories have been revised to better reflect the lower risk of transmission in schools when appropriate infection control measures and timely case investigation and contact tracing are in place (see table on page 8). Other qualitative features of the former guidance are now better specified (e.g., young learners are K-3, group size ≤ 15), and triggers for considering in-person learning among older students are clearer. In summary, the DOH guidance notes that:

"Taken together, the science and early experience of schools in Washington State and across the nation suggest that rigorous health and safety measures can limit transmission of COVID-19 in the school environment. DOH recommends comprehensive and strict health and safety measures ([PDF](#)) to minimize the risk of transmission within schools, and Proclamation 20-09.3 requires schools to implement them."

In Benton and Franklin counties, elementary schools, and small-group instruction in middle and high school, have successfully provided in-person learning in a hybrid model without COVID-19 disease transmission within the classroom environment. Even when students and staff with COVID-19 have been present at school, their infections, through case investigation and contact tracing, have not been shown to have occurred because of attending school. Students and staff have had to quarantine because of close contact with a positive case, but neither secondary nor sustained transmission of COVID-19 have been seen in school environments where appropriate infection control measures have been followed.

It has become clear to me through ongoing reports from the schools, as well as personal stories shared by families, that the needs in schools cut broadly across all grades and all demographics. School districts have also indicated that returning groups of 15 in middle and high schools will functionally allow for the same numbers of students to return as in their proposed hybrid models.

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The Health District had previously recommended that schools resume classes in January 2021 with the same cohorts who were attending in-person classes prior to winter breaks. Then, after a three-week waiting period, schools could follow the framework set forth in the DOH toolkit to consider bringing back additional layers as appropriate. For those school districts who currently have returned elementary school aged children to the classroom, phased transition of secondary students can begin as early as January 25, 2021. For those schools where no in-person learning occurred in December, they should use the DOH framework to begin phasing in the youngest and highest need students, and then proceed accordingly from there. This guidance presumes continued implementation of all health and safety measures recommended.

Considerations for Testing in K-12 Schools

Regarding the conduct of COVID-19 testing in schools, WA DOH has also released [Washington State K-12 School Testing Guidance](#). The document describes a framework for considering testing options in the school setting. Please note that the conduct of testing in the school setting is optional for schools and voluntary for testing subjects, albeit with the notable exception of Health District outbreak investigations. The Health District encourages schools to review those considerations and places the greatest emphasis on testing of symptomatic staff and students and, when indicated and feasible, serial testing among asymptomatic staff.

The role of Benton and Franklin county residents remains constant in reducing community transmission by wearing face coverings, maintaining physical distancing, avoiding gatherings with people outside their household, and staying home if sick or a close contact with someone with COVID-19. This information and more is available for both families and our educators on our website at covid19.bfhd.wa.gov.

I look forward to continuing to work with you and your school communities to implement DOH and OSPI guidance, monitor disease activity, and respond to suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19 that may occur in your schools. I also look forward to continuing our regular communication and collaboration as we navigate together through this challenging time.

Sincerely,



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Health Officer, Benton-Franklin Health District

